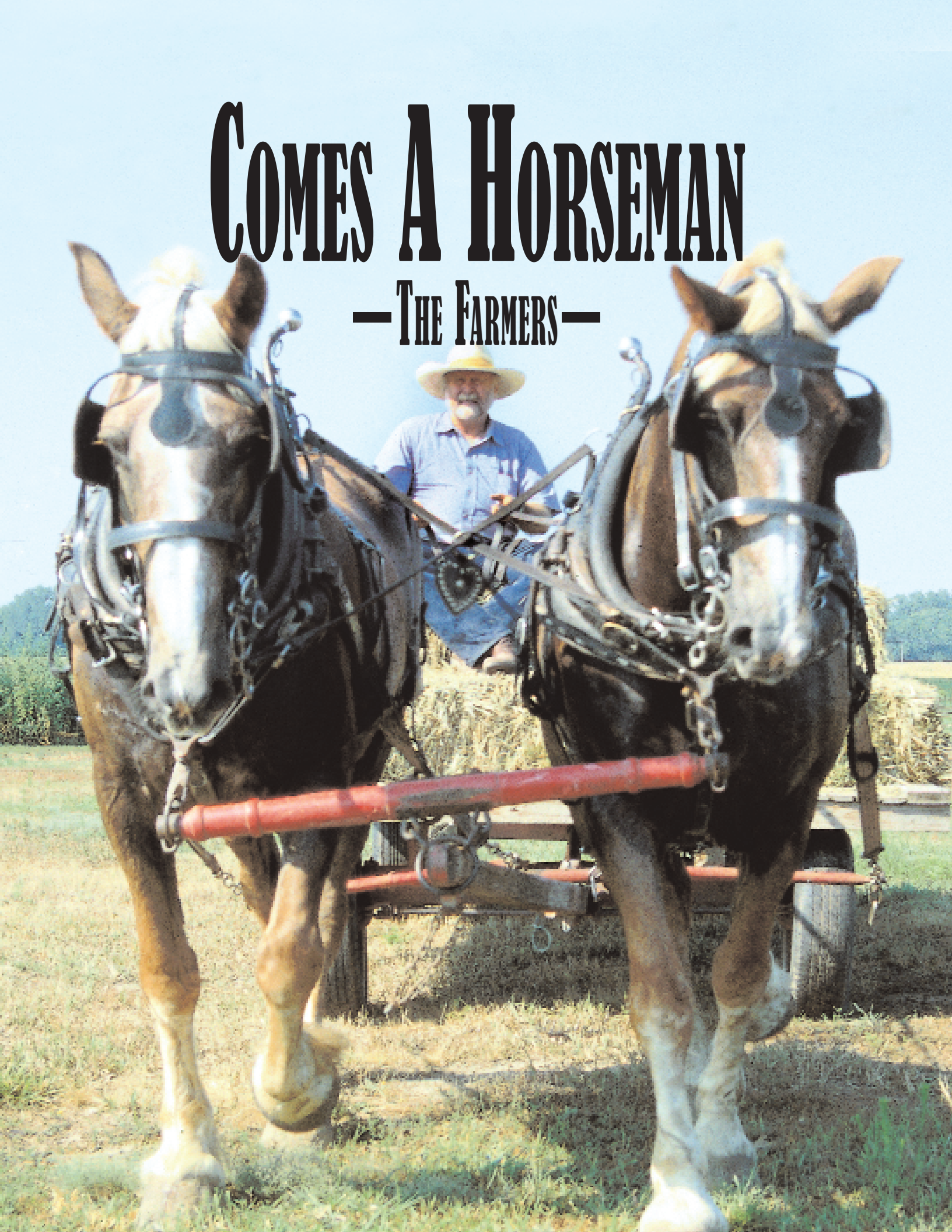
Comes A Horseman

—The Farmers—



Hardworking and patient, the draft horse carried the weight of Kansas agriculture on his strong, reliable shoulders. Part III of our series on horses follows these "gentle giants" as they labored in the

by Bobbie Athon

"Dad always walked beside the horses on the way home from the field. Never rode. He said they'd worked hard enough for one day." —Doris Hoffman,

(Left) Nelle and Belle with Rob Phillips, Lawrence.

He was a big blind draft horse who rescued cars and tractors stuck in the mud in Osage County during the 1930s. Although the days of the workhorse's usefulness were drawing to a close by then, Prince, the dark bay Percheron-cross maintained his position on the farm because of his sheer strength. "That one horse could out-pull any horse you got," his owner, Nathaniel Dean Athon, always said of him. And pull he did, as did all draft horses during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Leaning into their harnesses they provided the only power available to an assortment of heavy farm implements—plows, threshers, binders—working alongside the farmers in the field.

These "gentle giants," as they are sometimes called today, were the horses that carried the weight of Kansas agriculture on their strong, reliable shoulders and helped make the state a leader in this vital industry.

The draft horse of today is thought to descend from the hardy stock of Northern Europe. These horses, commonly called cold-bloods because of their calmer temperaments, adapted to the cold, damp climates in the moors and heaths and thrived on the poor quality food sources available to them. From A.D. 200 to 1000 the heavy, durable characteristics formed an equine type called the Black Horse of Flanders, which lived in Belgium and Northern France and is thought to be the father of all modern draft horses.

Throughout the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries Flanders descendants were shipped to America to breed with lighter horses and create an animal suited for a variety of heavy labor. Cities put draft horses to work pulling large freight wagons, forg-

The Power of Teamwork (Left) A matched pair of gray Percherons takes a rest between jobs at Meriden's Horse-Power Days. (Lower left) Prince and Charley, a young team of Suffolk Punch horses, the rarest and one of the oldest draft breeds. They are owned and trained by Bill Kabus, Meriden. (Below, black-and-white images) The use of horsepower through the seasonal cycle of farming, Russell County: drilling (planting) wheat, Patterson farm, autumn 1910; harvesting wheat, Garrett farm, late spring 1912; plowing after harvest, Anschutz farm, summer 1910. (Right) Nelle and Belle, a team of Belgians, the most popular draft horse breed in America since 1937. This team is owned by Rob Phillips, Free State Farm, Lawrence.

ing roads, and building bridges. And the military used these large animals to transport heavy artillery. The draft horses' most important role, however, would be on the farm, where they bore the load of fieldwork with the help of mules and oxen.

Although oxen were the preferred draft animal on eighteenth-century American farms, they were slow and clumsy, especially on winter terrain. The revolution of agricultural technology, beginning around 1820, created a demand for a larger and faster animal to power the new equipment. And as farm sizes increased from a few acres in the East to several hundred acres in the Midwest and West, a greater power source was essential.

In the late 1830s farmers began importing European breeds to increase the size and strength of their horses. The Percheron, from the La Perche region in France, was the first draft breed to be imported to American farms, coming in 1839. Their Flanders ancestors had been crossed with Arabians and Andalusians, making them strong, but at the same time agile and athletic. They remained the most numerous draft horse in America for nearly one hundred years until surpassed by the Belgian, also descended from Flanders, in 1937. The popularity of the Belgian grew primarily because they were thought to be more compact, more economical, and their lack of long foot hair, or feathers, required less grooming. These and numerous other draft breeds provided the horsepower for Kansas farms. Bred for size, stamina, and agility, these horses could work through the hottest days of summer.

"We must not forget," H. W. Avery said in 1904, "that the ultimate aim of all improved breeds of draft-horses is the production of an ideal work-horse." The Clay County Percheron breeder continued, "The draft-horse, whose patient and cheerful labor, next to the blessings of the Almighty, has been the most important factor in raising and marketing your record-breaking wheat crops and . . . corn crops. . . . [The workhorse] is, when properly

As a tribute to their role in Kansas history, draft horses are featured in several annual events: Horse-Power Days in Meriden (785-863-3072), the Sawlog 'n' Strings Bluegrass Festival near Jetmore (620-357-6534), and the Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson (620-669-3600). Information on Kansas draft horses and draft horse events is available from the Kansas Draft Horse and Mule Association, 620-584-6322; www.members.cox. net/kdhma

cared for, the best-paying product on the farm."

Farmers learned that good nutrition was critical in raising strong, healthy workhorses. They discovered that the most important stage was during a foal's first winter. The cold weather developed stamina, and a diet rich in protein built strong bones and muscles. "The nature and quantity of food given should have careful consideration," advised the Kansas State Board of Agriculture in 1904. Grooming, too, was especially important for animals "engaged in heavy farm work." As a writer for the Tribune Farmer admonished, "when a horse has worked all day" he shouldn't have to "spend half the night in rubbing off his sweat."

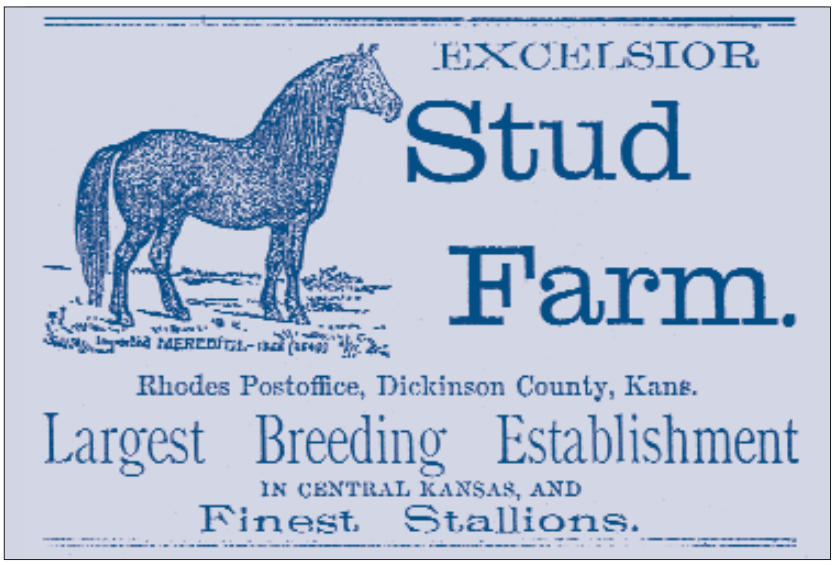
Every aspect of raising farm crops needed workhorses. Harnessed together in teams of two or more, they pulled plows that turned the earth, initially breaking up the sod prairies. They followed with discs and harrows to refine the soil. Horses towed drills that planted the seed, powered cultivators that hoed row crops, pulled binders and pushed headers that cut the wheat. They also transported stalk cutters, corn huskers, and early threshing machines, and, before the advent of steam tractors, powered the threshers. At the end of harvest, before planting began again, horses were hitched to wagons to haul the grain to market.

Some farmers have said that the workhorse never pulled anything. Real horsepower comes as the horse lowers his head and leans into the collar. The collar, harness, and tie straps actually pull the load. To prevent soreness in the horses' withers it was necessary that the padded collar fit the horse with just the right pressure; too tight and it would cause a blister. Entries in the personal diary of George Washington Franklin tell that his mare, Betty, suffered the effects of hard days of work. The Fort Scott farmer prepared and applied poultices to reduce the heat and toughen the mare's skin.

Thursday October 25, 1928

Greased Betty's neck & rubbed salt & vinegar on her withers & neck, as withers seem to be too warm, or heat in one of them—on left side.

Franklin knew that such warmth in the withers was not unusual in a workhorse, but the condition must be treated.



ONLY THE FINEST (Above) This ad appeared in the April 9, 1886, issue of the *Hope Dispatch*. Excelsior Farm, owned by Alfred Pray, had as many as 200 Percherons, including several imported stallions. (Right) Prince and Charley work in the hay field with owner Bill Kabus. (Far right) William Davis and his mare plow a plot of land in Osage County, 1959.

Numerous draft horse farms emerged in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in Kansas. In the 1870s the Wiley ranch in Elmdale treated Chase County residents to a rare sight. Brightly outfitted English grooms escorted a load of draft horses, having just arrived from overseas, to their new home. The grooms unloaded the horses from the train cars and waited until the cool of the evening to walk the valuable, travel-weary animals to their new stables. Once the horses were safely delivered, the grooms returned to England.

One of earliest and most successful Percheron farms was founded in 1879 near Whitewater in Butler County. That year owner J. W. Robison moved twenty-five head of Percherons (two rail car loads) from Illinois to his eleven-thousand-acre tract. Over the years Robison imported hundreds of horses from France, averaging twenty-five horses each year. Robison's barn in 1909 had concrete floors, natural light during the day with acetylene gas lamps at night, and was heated in cold weather.

Mount Bethel Farms near Meriden, established in 1868 by Adam Becker from Germany, still operates today. Through the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries the farm produced winning Percherons. In the late 1930s the farm's horse population decreased from three hundred head to a few teams, as draft animals were replaced with tractors. But in the early 1990s Mount Bethel once again began to increase its horse population and today has a number of purebred Percherons.

Glenn D. McMurray of Reno County preferred riding draft horses rather than the lighter breeds. "Since I liked to ride bareback when I was small, the workhorses were easier for me to ride," McMurray said. "The so-called 'riding' horses had sharper, narrower backs, and, without a saddle, they were very uncomfortable to ride." He learned at an early age to drive the teams, working up to four horses at a time. "When I was little I always got to ride the team home from the field," recalled Doris Hoffman, who helped her dad during the 1920s and 1930s on his Dickinson County farm. As she got older, her favorite job was cultivating with a two-horse team.

Farmers always had a favorite team, ones that worked well together. In her short story "Reunion," Margaret Jagger of Ottawa County describes an encounter her grandfather had with a pair of workhorses he regretfully had sold:

> Suddenly he stopped. He stared intently at a team of horses pulling a delivery dray up the bricked street. "Cap and Prince!" Grandpa exclaimed. He smiled, recognizing the handsome team, old friends, really, which he had sold over a year ago. He had often wondered about them. . . . "Do you know me, fellows? Sure you do. Is everything all right with you?" Prince nickered softly. Cap rubbed against Grand-

pa's shoulder.

Esther Beck recalled her father's team, Daisy and Blind Billie, inseparable workhorses on a farm near Hesston. They shared a stall in the barn, and when the teams came in from the fields in the evening, Daisy would let the other horses crowd in front and wait with Billie to lead him into the barn. When they were turned out to pasture, Daisy sometimes went ahead of her mate, but his panicked whinny called her back, and she returned to help guide him through the gate.

The dilemma of changing from workhorse to the "newfangled tractor" was shared by many Kansas farmers. George Washington Franklin came to the realization that his power needs exceeded what his team, Beaute and Betty, could muster. One day in March 1929 while harrowing, Franklin recognized that "3 sections is too big a load for 2 horses." He decided to purchase a tractor.

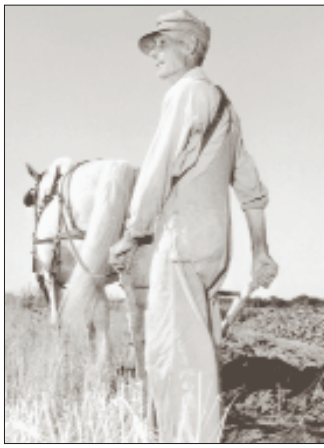
Bill Smith also delayed replacing his team of workhorses with a tractor as long as he felt he could. But a tractor could move at five miles per hour and plow a thirty-two-inch swath, more than double the work of Smith's team, Jim and Bess. Economics, not choice, forced Bill to retire Jim and Bess in the 1940s. Jim lived on for many years watching the tractor work the fields. A 1957 article recalls one poignant moment between horse and farmer. "When Farmer Smith came to the end of a furrow, he idled the tractor and climbed down. Smith ambled over to the fence and patted the horse. In turn, Old Jim nuzzled his master. No words were needed." When a butcher offered a good price for Jim for horse meat, Smith chased him off the farm with a pitchfork.

The switch from horse to tractor sometimes proved difficult for farmers. Emporia author Don Coldsmith recorded one teenager's first memorable experience: the boy eased the tractor down the rows and relaxed so much that he began to sing as he would with the team. The difference was that the tractor didn't slow down at the end of the row. "It kept on straight ahead," Coldsmith wrote. "In fact, although he was pulling back hard on the steering wheel and hollering 'whoa' at the top of his lungs, the tractor was still going straight ahead when it went through the fence."

Some farmers resisted technology and opted to continue farming with horses. Into the 1980s Howard Johnstone of Wabaunsee County farmed 240 acres with his team of Belgian horses. "We need to get back to basics," Johnstone affirmed. "We should use what God gave us in the land and the animals and work it together."

Farmers could easily see the technological advantage of machinery, but the transition to tractors was gradual because they were not readily available until after World War I. The horse and mule population on Kansas farms peaked in 1915 at 1,339,395 head. That same year the number of tractors was 2,493. Ownership of horses and mules declined steadily from that point, and ownership of tractors began a steady rise. In 1935 farmers owned about 70,000 tractors to 700,000 head of horses and mules. Until the end of World War II many farms retained a team of horses along with at least one tractor. But as war production came to a close, tractor manufacturing resumed at normal levels, and workhorses became the power of the past by 1950. Only those farmers most devoted to their horses, it seemed, kept their faithful servants along with their new, more productive equipment.

While technology continues to advance on today's farms, the draft horse still has a place among those who love and admire these "gentle giants." About fifteen hundred draft horses are raised in Kansas today, many seen in shows and pulling competitions and some hitched to a mower or a drill on working farms. "When tractors and trucks are stuck and can't make it up the hills, my horses just keep going," smiles Bill Kabus, a longtime horseman of Meriden.



On a warm August afternoon Bill rides along on his hay wagon, gives his team a "click click" sound and a light tug to the left on the reins. His team, Prince and Charley, are a matched pair of Suffolk Punch draft horses. As they ease into a slow trot, someone in the wagon asks, "Bill, do you prefer the Suffolk breed? Do you like them best—better than the Percherons or Belgians or other breeds?"

"Oh," Bill drawls, his hands moving in rhythm with the horses—hands, like those of farmers from past generations, that have cared for his horses all his life. "No," he says, keeping his eyes on Prince and Charley, "I love 'em all." KH

Editor's note: Future issues of Kansas Heritage will present additional installments of "Comes a Horseman," featuring the horse's roles in the development of Kansas: its contributions to ranching and its participation in competitions.

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